

by expanding Head Start's focus on school readiness. Low-income children will be taught key early learning skills such as alphabet, number, color and shape recognition to help them succeed in their school years.

This bill also opens poor-performing Head Start programs to greater public scrutiny and needful competition. Triennial program reviews by the Federal government and independent investigation by the Government Accountability Office have revealed that some Head Start programs operate with Federal tax dollars despite chronic financial mismanagement, health and safety concerns, and poor community involvement.

H.R. 1429 would help remedy this situation by requiring Head Start programs to demonstrate active partnerships with local school districts to ensure smooth transitions for children into kindergarten. Poor-performing programs would be opened to competition every 5 years. Annual disclosures of financial information and greater participation of parents in the decisions of Head Start governing boards will also make a difference.

I have personally seen the benefits of partnering local school districts with Head Start. Several years ago, a long-standing Head Start program serving 1,000 children in Douglas County, Nebraska was transferred to the control of the Omaha Public School District to end long-standing financial mismanagement and safety concerns for children.

Omaha Public Schools went the extra mile by partnering with EduCare, an outstanding private preschool program that involves the entire family, emphasizes best practices, and focuses on early learning skills to help disadvantaged children succeed in school and life.

EduCare was created by Susie Buffett and currently serves 239 children from Omaha families living below the poverty level. Families must either work, be in job training, or attending school to qualify. Enrollment is free, with costs covered by the Nebraska Department of Education, Omaha Public Schools, the Department of Health and Human Services and private sources.

EduCare has a low child-to-adult ratio: three infants per adult, and six preschoolers per adult. Bachelor level staff members are trained in early childhood education, and the program contains strong academic components to help children succeed in school, including limited English proficiency children.

Buffett has said: "We look at the whole entire family, not just the child." Parents are directed to community resources to improve home life, such as food shelters and Christmas toy drives. Single mothers are helped with transportation and job searches.

Preliminary evaluation data indicates that the EduCare program is making a significant difference in the lives of children. Upon entering the program, children's language, literacy and social emotional areas of development are assessed. Most children initially score in the borderline range of development. Annual assessment results have shown the majority of participating children gained more vocabulary words in the course of the school year than one would expect based on maturity.

By the time they transitioned to kindergarten, EduCare's children were scoring very close to the national average. Standardized assessments of children's literacy and kindergarten readiness skills show similar results.

Because research has shown children's vocabulary and pre-literacy skills to predict later school success, every Head Start program should help children reach such strong learning potential while addressing the short and long-term needs of the child's family. EduCare is an incredible success story in the lives of low-income children.

I also want to draw the attention of my colleagues to a provision of this bill to protect Head Start for children of military families. The privatization of military housing created an artificial raise in a military family's income, making their children ineligible for Head Start. H.R. 1429 would disregard the Basic Housing Allowance from a family's income when determining Head Start eligibility. Servicemembers protecting our freedom need not worry about their children's continued access to Head Start.

Mr. Chairman, I hope we can go even further in the future to strengthen the academic emphasis in Head Start and give states and excellent programs such as EduCare a greater ability to improve the lives of low-income children and their families. H.R. 1429 makes good progress in this direction.

Mr. STARK. Mr. Chairman, I rise today in strong support of the Improving Head Start Act of 2007 (H.R. 1429).

Since 1965, Head Start has served millions of low-income families and helped children prepare for school. It is an essential program and one whose success has a major impact on children, their families, their community, and ultimately the future of our country. We owe it to our children to pass this bill and make improvements that strengthen and grow the Head Start program.

Scientific research shows us that 80 percent of brain development occurs by age 3 and 90 percent by age 5. Studies also show that education achievement gaps between poor and minority students and affluent and non-minority students are already in place when children begin elementary school. These achievement gaps, once in place, tend to persist and are exceedingly difficult to remedy. Head Start and Early Head Start are effective in closing achievement gaps and foster both short and long-term success in participating children.

In addition to preparing children for success in school, recent research clearly demonstrates that children enrolled in Early Head Start and their parents realize other very significant gains. Early Head Start children show better approaches to learning, demonstrate more appropriate language acquisition, and exhibit less aggressive behavior. Early Head Start parents create a stronger home environment with more parent-child reading and a greater repertoire of discipline strategies. Early Head Start parents also show significant progress toward economic self-sufficiency. These impacts are significant and result in children with increased linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional competence. What better investment could we be making for our children?

Unlike programs dreamed up by ideologues in the Bush Administration like "abstinence only education" and "marriage promotion," we know that Head Start works. Unfortunately, less than half of eligible children are enrolled in Head Start. Even worse, less than 5 percent of eligible infants and toddlers are enrolled in Early Head Start.

If we are serious about providing all children with an opportunity to succeed in school and

in life, we must expand Head Start and particularly Early Head Start. This bill is a step in that direction. It will more than double the amount of money available to Early Head Start programs. The bill will also expand services to infants and toddlers that are so crucial to child development, but often difficult for parents to access. In addition, the Improving Head Start Act will increase eligibility levels so that children from families making up to 130 percent of the Federal poverty level can participate. This change is especially important in areas of the country with high costs of living, including my district where the poverty threshold is well below what it actually costs a family to live.

This bill's expansion of Early Head Start and Head Start should be applauded. We cannot lose sight, however, that these programs only address the tip of the iceberg. This Congress must focus more of our attention on all children birth to age 5 and guarantee that all families have access to high quality comprehensive early care and education programs. This is an investment that our country must make if we are serious about giving all of our children a chance at the American dream.

Despite the strong bipartisan support for this legislation, the White House has indicated that the President does not support this legislation as written unless we insert a special interest provision for the religious right. The President and many Republicans want to allow religious organizations to discriminate in their hiring practices. Religious organizations have been Head Start providers since the program was established and have done quite well playing by the same rules that prohibit all employers from discriminating. Pandering rhetoric and veiled threats from the White House will not improve the life of a single family.

In closing, I hope that all of my colleagues will see the importance of investing in our children and supporting families. I urge a "yes" vote on this legislation and a "no" vote on Republican attempts to turn this into a vehicle for religious discrimination.

Mr. WU. Mr. Chairman, I rise in strong support of this legislation.

Head Start has proven its ability to improve the lives of disadvantaged children. Numerous studies have demonstrated that children who attend Head Start come to school more prepared than children who do not participate, and that these effects last over a period of years.

I have personal experience with the program—my wife, Michelle, was a Head Start teacher for 7 years in Oregon. In her classes, I saw the children of janitors and security guards.

Their parents worked in the sparkling towers of downtown Portland, but they themselves never got to visit downtown, except in their Head Start field trips.

The Improving Head Start Act makes several needed changes to current law. It ends the use of the National Reporting System—a flawed testing system that has tested over 500,000 4-year-olds, despite strong opposition by child development experts.

The bill also improves current law by making clear that Head Start agencies must establish and maintain a formal structure of shared governance with parent policy councils. This will codify in law that parents have the ability to shape and share a role in the success of their local Head Start program.